Going for Improvement

By Dr. Lewis C. Solmon

My recent study ("Study finds charter students improve more on test; District scores higher, official counters," Tribune, April 1) found that, on average, attendance at a charter school for two or three consecutive years resulted in one extra month of student growth in reading per year, as measured by Stanford 9 scores, and at least equal growth in math. Charters do better the longer kids attend them, but students who return to a traditional school still benefit from having attended a charter.

Changing schools has a negative effect on students, but mobility within the charter sector is usually better than stability in a traditional public school. This work has stimulated discussion about charter school effectiveness, including an editorial, "Chance to choose," on April 8, and several letters. It is time to address the critics.

It has been suggested that the charter and traditional students we studied were not similar regarding many factors that we know affect standardized test scores. We analyzed three years of Stanford 9 test score data from a group of 40,000 to 60,000 public school students in Arizona. Our data enable us to compare year-to-year changes in test scores of individual students who attended charters with other public school students matched by traditional public school attended, grade level, and test scores. Furthermore, we did not directly consider the students' family income or socioeconomic status because our data did not include such measures (or any estimate of parental involvement either). Yet because the matched group of students who always attended traditional public schools came from the same schools as those who had moved to charters, it is likely that their incomes were similar.

More importantly, we were able to utilize cutting-edge analyses to control statistically for all measured and unmeasured traits of each individual student. Thus, we have actually asked the question of how does the type of school attended affects students who otherwise are similar in terms of income, parental involvement and many other factors. We cannot attribute the success of charter schools to the fact that they have better students because they do not have better students overall. Rather than "creaming" the best students from traditional public schools, it appears that Arizona charter schools, particularly at the high school level, have become havens for students with special problems, returning former dropouts, and others "referred" to them by traditional public schools. Both reading and math scores in our sample on the Stanford 9 test were lower for charter school students in all three years we analyzed. Test scores start out lower in charter schools and, depending on the school, they may end up lower as well. But that is not the measure of the relative effectiveness of charter and traditional schools.

The appropriate question is which sector adds more to the scores of its students. In other words, which schools help kids learn the most. By that measure, charter schools prevail.
Some question whether the proper measure of the effectiveness of any school is test score growth. If that is the standard, won't teachers teach to the test and thereby deprive students of opportunities to learn things not on the test? Possibly.

But if the test is measuring student competency in reading or math, aren't these exactly the things we want our children to learn? So why shouldn't we measure student progress in these areas? Why not judge schools at least in part by their success in improving the reading and math skills of their students?

No one is arguing that all parents should always send their children to the school with the highest test scores. Each family must identify its child's particular needs and select the school best suited

to those. For some, a small school that deals well with low-achieving children may be best even if average test scores there are low.

What we are saying is that taking all school and student characteristics into account, on average (but not in every case) charter schools result in greater student learning of reading and math. That should be a goal for every student. Nevertheless, the type of school may be more important for some kids' learning than for others'. Some have asked if a one-month-per-year extra gain is sufficient to tout the superiority of charter schools. We have to remember that our study found that positive charter effects were larger the longer kids attended them. Since we have only three years of data, it is likely that this extra gain will be larger as students spend more time in charters. Moreover, earlier studies by others have shown that the size of the effect of reducing class size from 35 to 30 is six-tenths of a month and from 25 to 20, nine-tenths of a month, both smaller than the charter effect. And since the cost of class-size reduction is immense, whereas charter schools cost less to operate than do traditional public schools, the “cost effectiveness” (the cost of getting, say, a one-month gain in achievement) of charters is clearly superior to that of this often-advocated reform — class-size reduction.

Evidence from a single school never is much good for drawing broad conclusions about effectiveness of categories of schools like charters. So I cannot resist pointing out that Maurice Wolfthal (“Charters, public schools are apples, oranges,” Commentary, April 20), who disparages charters, criticizes Janet Stoeppelmann (“Charter students arrive with needs, old habits,” Commentary, April 13) for having cited evidence from her own school (“ . . . would the evidence from a single school prove the superiority of charter schools? Not by any scientific standards”). Two paragraphs later he says, “Let me tell you about a district school in South Phoenix where I taught for four years . . . One hundred percent were below the poverty level . . . ”
Anyone can select an anecdote to prove any point. Statistical studies of large groups are more useful for making generalizations.

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